



Silent Night

by Lt. Chris Petrock

We brief NORDO procedures before every flight. Sure, many of us have had an amplifier give out mid-flight so that we were unable to transmit, but in this age of two radios and state-of-the-art equipment, what are the odds of going completely NORDO in the cockpit? Higher than I would have expected.

"Three Oh One's airborne," I called, as I launched into the darkness. Instead of the expected acknowledgment from departure, I got no response. I repeated my message. Again, dead silence. This time, however, I noticed the lack of a sidetone when I keyed the radio.

"Can anyone hear me?" I asked on our tactical frequency. "OK," I thought, "one of my comm cords must have come loose on the cat shot. I'll just wait until I'm safely away from the water and start checking my connections."

I switched my squawk to 7600 and donned my NVGs as I passed 3,000 feet. I continued checking in, on the off chance that I was actually transmitting. After leveling off overhead the ship at our pre-briefed rendezvous altitude, I began troubleshooting. Disconnecting and re-connecting all of my comm cords, turning both radios off and back on, and

initiating a BIT of the comm system, didn't fix the problem. After pushing and prying the hose connection between the seat pan and the seat pad with no success, I knew I was destined for a night of silence.

I patiently waited for my first playmate to arrive overhead. When he did, I feverishly flashed my external lights. He returned the flashes, joined to the inside of the turn, and secured his strobes, signaling that he had assumed the lead. "OK, now what?" I wondered. We continued to orbit until our two remaining wingmen joined. I could see on the NVGs that Dash 1 was the last plane to join. As I expected, he stayed on the inside of the turn while the plane that I had originally joined on slid to the outside. After Dash 3 and 4 departed, I assumed we would remain overhead until the end of the cycle or proceed to the tanker for our fragged gas.

Surprisingly, my lead started to descend. When I saw a quick squirt out of his fuel dumps, I figured that we must be headed for an immediate recovery. I began warily dumping gas, because I didn't want to dump all the way down to max trap right away in case of some unforeseen delay.



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The descent was uncomfortably quiet, and I soon figured out why. Leveling off at 1,200 feet, I noticed that the altitude displayed in my HUD was flashing. Since I had no aural warnings in my headset, I had never heard my radar altimeter go off passing 5,000 feet (I had neglected to roll the bug down during the descent and did not notice the red light illuminate). When we were established on what I assumed to be a final approach course, I resumed dumping fuel down to max trap.

At 10 miles from the ship, my lead flashed his lights a couple times and we proceeded to drop the gear and go to half flaps (per squadron SOP). I selected the ILS and my lead took the ACLS needles. The ship came into view inside of six miles, and the tip over was uneventful. Just outside three-quarters of a mile, my lead added power and climbed while I was given a long shot of cut lights for my "roger ball." I transitioned to full flaps and flew my best approach, knowing that paddles would be unable to give me any line-up calls. In close, I was given a subsequent quick burst of cut lights for a "power" call and rolled out into the 2-wire, ending my ordeal.

I learned several lessons from this experience. First, regardless of what aircraft you're flying, never assume that a complete NORDO situation can't happen to you. (By the way, mine was caused by a loose, seat-pan connection.)

Second, especially at night when signals are difficult to pass, thoroughly brief all contingencies (shuffling flight members, passing the lead, tanking, and planned recovery time) so everyone's on the same sheet of music.

Next, I could have used my PRC-112 to pass information on guard. I didn't think about this tactic until we had started our descent to the ship, by which time I had my hands full just flying formation. I should have pulled the radio out overhead mother while waiting for someone to join. Also, as we all know, it takes a few seconds to transition from flying formation to flying the ball. On a clear night, with the ship in plain view, earlier is better than later when detaching a NORDO wingman.

Finally, never get so involved in the process that you break habit patterns (such as radar-altimeter discipline). NORDO is a legitimate emergency and should be treated as such. 

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